

VZCZCXRO5793
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHDJ #1299/01 3161043
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1011
INFO IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA 0040

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DJIBOUTI 001299

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/11/12

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SUBJECT: NORTHERN DJIBOUTI: BEYOND SECURITY CONCERNS, HOPE FOR
INFRASTRUCTURE AND GROWTH

REF: 09 DJIBOUTI 649; 09 DJIBOUTI 1053; 09 DJIBOUTI 93

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Ambassador visited the northern, primarily ethnic-Afar regions of Obock and Tadjourah November 2-4. Local officials remained concerned that Eritrean-influenced elements continued to infiltrate remote areas of northern Djibouti, and reported one recent and possibly Eritrean-linked mine explosion. Nevertheless, government officials said that they continued to move freely through the impacted areas, and all interlocutors emphasized that the overall small numbers of Eritrean-influenced elements were largely composed of ethnic Afars of Eritrean or Ethiopian origin, rather than of Djiboutian nationals. Locally-elected officials had little progress to report in the ongoing decentralization process, and continued to cite lack of independent budgetary resources as a major constraint. Civil society leaders and government officials alike hailed several recent infrastructure improvements-including the inauguration of a Japanese-funded ferry to Djibouti City-and expressed hope for several more ambitious planned projects, such as a new deep water port at Tadjourah and an improved road linking northern Djibouti to an Ethiopian highway to Addis Ababa. Highlighting ongoing U.S. commitment to development in the north, Ambassador inaugurated two new Special-Self help projects, and assured local leaders that pending renewed approval from GODJ military leadership, the USG would be ready to send civil affairs teams-absent at the GODJ's request since the outbreak of hostilities on the Djibouti-Eritrea border in June 2008-back to northern regions. END SUMMARY.

SECURITY: ANOTHER MINE INCIDENT HIGHLIGHTS

ONGOING CONCERN ON ERITREAN INFILTRATION

12. (C) Obock Prefet Omar Mohamed told Ambassador that while the GODJ remained concerned about small groups of Eritrean-influenced elements hiding in remote areas of northern Djibouti, the GODJ had not felt it was necessary to restrict movements of government officials in the impacted areas. (NOTE. Djiboutian military forces continue to control some areas of northern Djibouti, including those closest to the contested Djibouti-Eritrea border. END NOTE.) Mohamed said that he himself continued to travel as normal throughout the district, although he made a point of not announcing the destinations of his trips in advance. Mohamed also emphasized that there was very limited participation of Djiboutian nationals in these groups, which largely consisted of Eritrean- or Ethiopian-nationality ethnic Afars.

13. (C) Tadjourah Prefet Abdourazak Daoud echoed the Obock Prefet's points--the GODJ remained seized with the security issue, but estimated that there was limited Djiboutian participation in what were largely small groups of Eritrean/Ethiopian nationality Afars. Daoud also told Ambassador that the latest in a sporadic string of mine incidents in northern Djibouti (ref A) had occurred several weeks ago, when a military water truck had been hit by a light vehicle mine in Lokkoli, a small, remote community in the district of Tadjourah located less than 20 km from the Eritrean border. Daoud said that there had been no injuries in the incident, which he suspected might have been perpetrated by Eritrean elements who then returned over the border. There had been movement of Eritrean defectors/deserters over the border earlier that day, he said.

14. (SBU) Obock Prefet Mohamed also remained concerned over ongoing flows of illegal migrants transiting through Djibouti to Obock, where they caught boats to Yemen (ref B). Mohamed said that the government of Yemen had cracked down on the operators of such boats, partly out of concern that some migrants arriving in Yemen were being recruited by rebel groups. As a result, wait times for migrants to catch a boat had increased, and numbers had decreased, from up to 200 migrants departing each night to approximately 100 departing every two or three days. Ambassador made a brief visit to the local hospital in Obock, where at least one migrant had

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reportedly died of cholera.

DECENTRALIZATION: MODEST PROGRAMS,
LITTLE NEW PROGRESS

15. (SBU) Ambassador met in both Obock and Tadjourah with representatives from Regional Councils elected in Djibouti's first-ever regional elections of 2006. Both Councils continued to manage the limited responsibilities transferred from the central to the district level during the ongoing decentralization process--including trash pickups, local market management, and jurisdiction for civil documents such as birth certificates. However, neither Council had much progress to report in improving these services or securing additional budgetary resources to support them. Tadjourah Council members told Ambassador that while there were many activities planned on paper, they lacked the budget and even the separate "fiscal identity" to obtain funds necessary to carry them out. Council members in Obock and Tadjourah expressed very guarded optimism that sufficient momentum and resources would materialize for the Regional Councils to show the electorate significant accomplishments before the fast-approaching regional elections of 2011.

16. (U) Prefets have seconded some resources to the Regional Councils to help them fulfill their newly assigned responsibilities. In Obock, the Prefet had assigned several staff members for civil document management to the Regional Council, and had also ceded several waste management staff, and a waste collection truck with a fuel allowance. However, all acknowledged that the Chinese-model truck was aging and in need of repairs for which there were no spare parts, and did not currently function. Obock Regional Council members said that an ongoing UNDP project was helping them formulate a plan for waste collection, but would not fund a vehicle. In Tadjourah, the Prefet said that while he had seconded a waste management staff of nearly 30 people to the Regional Council, most of those workers were nearing or past

retirement, and not really adequate to tackle the task at hand.

NEW INFRASTRUCTURE PROMISES BETTER

LINKS; MORE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

¶7. (U) Outside the regional capital towns of Obock and Tadjourah, economic activity is largely confined to nomadic pastoralism, limited market gardening in areas that have enough water resources, and a small but growing tourism sector catering mostly to French expatriates. While other opportunities-including fishing and small-scale businesses and trading-are available in the two towns, economic opportunity remains limited, especially in Obock. Demand is strong for a Catholic-affiliated vocational training center Ambassador visited in Tadjourah, but many graduates reportedly must move to Djibouti City to seek work. Ambassador also visited several of the Tadjourah region's most promising new projects, including two new hotels, a small and thriving water-bottling factory, and a large American-led salt extraction project on the outskirts of the Tadjourah region (ref C).

¶8. (U) Local officials were cheered by the completion of several important infrastructure projects in the region, including an improved road between Obock and Tadjourah, and the October 22 inauguration of a Japanese-financed ferry which is to provide regular and reasonably priced service to Djibouti City. Several additional infrastructure projects are planned in the region,

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including a new deep water port at Tadjourah, and the construction of a road from that port through the northwestern communities of Dorra and Balho and connecting to a major Ethiopian highway to Addis Ababa. This road is to be financed by grant aid from the government of Kuwait, as announced by the Kuwaiti Prime Minister during a visit to Djibouti in July.

SELF-HELP PROJECTS HIGHLIGHT U.S.

COMMITMENT TO NORTHERN REGIONS

¶9. (SBU) On several occasions, Regional Council representatives and Prefets of Obock and Tadjourah reiterated their long-standing request for Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) civil affairs teams to come back to northern Djibouti. Ambassador explained that while the USG would continue to respect GODJ military leadership's prohibition-in force since the June 2008 Djibouti-Eritrea border skirmish-on civil affairs teams in northern Djibouti, the USG remained open to teams working in the north, and continued to work closely with the GODJ on modalities for lifting or easing the current restrictions.

¶10. (U) Highlighting other forms of ongoing USG assistance in northern Djibouti, Ambassador inaugurated two new Special Self-Help projects, including a beekeeping initiative in a remote, mountainous village, and a center for selling artisanal crafts at a roadside community on the route used by most tourists travelling to

northern Djibouti. The craft center inauguration received prominent coverage on state-run television.

KEEPING AFAR REGIONS ON THE MAP

¶11. (C) COMMENT. Djibouti's largely ethnic-Afar northern regions clashed with the Somali-dominated central government during the armed civil conflicts of the 1990s. Djibouti's current government—including the cabinet and the National Assembly—is carefully balanced to include ethnic Afars, and former opposition leaders. It is hard to determine what level of discontent with the status quo may still remain among the northern regions' populations, although it appears likely that most of the recent security concerns are linked to Eritrean-influenced elements. However, the GODJ continues pushing infrastructure projects that improve the north's links to the capital, and help to create economic opportunities for northern youth. Whether in northern or southern Djibouti, the GODJ could do more to make sure that regional councils are empowered to take on the roles they have been assigned—both to fulfill the decentralization promises made in the peace accords which ended the 1990s' civil conflict, and to ensure that citizens know that it is locally-chosen elected officials who should be held accountable for key decentralized local services.
END COMMENT.
SWAN